for airports in Nebraska and Iowa in particular. It also addresses a point of fundamental fairness.

For years Congress has bottled up money from the Aviation Trust Fund, which takes in about $10 billion a year in user fees. The central purpose of the fund has been to finance airport improvements and maintenance, and in theory it was earmarked for that. But the money was left unspent as a piece of fiscal sleight-of-hand meant to make federal deficits appear smaller.

For Rep. Bud Shuster, R–Pa., chairman of the House Transportation Committee, it became almost a moral crusade to get the fund separated from the general budget, with its revenues to be used solely for airport projects. After years of impasse, the Senate agreed that, without actually separating the funds, spending on airports each year will equal or exceed the fund's revenues and interest.

That looks like a distinction without a difference, but so be it. That's politics. The cork is out of the bottle. At bottom, this was made possible by two factors: (1) The federal government, at least by some accounting methods, is now running surpluses, not deficits. (2) It's an election year—the House passed the measure by better than 3-to-1.

The legislation also raised the cap on airport-imposed passenger fees, from $3 to $4.50. This is mostly to the good, since local airports commonly use them for improvements to benefit those same passengers. For the record, that $1.50 increase is going to look like $6 on a lot of airline tickets.

That's because on a round-trip ticket, the fee gets you literally coming and going, and it can be imposed for a maximum of two segments on each flight. Thus, a passenger flying, say from Omaha to Orlando with a stop in St. Louis and returning could rack up four of those $1.50 increases. (That's up to the individual airports, but it's hard to imagine many of them forgoing the revenue.)

A dozen airports in Nebraska and Iowa, with Omaha's Eppley Airfield leading the way, will get their federal entitlements doubled over each of the next three years. For Eppley, this means more than $7 million for construction that wasn't there before—just what is needed by an airport whose passenger boardings are expected to double in the next 11 years.

Some other aspects of the bill are equally welcome.

Of prime concern, modernizing the nation's decrepit air traffic control system will get a substantial boost, nearly $1 billion per year. In addition, there are provisions to help airlines buy so-called ''regional'' jets, provided they use them to serve small airports. There are funds to help improve the training of airport security checkpoint personnel, as well as money to put emergency locator devices on smaller jets.

The measure also mandates collision-avoidance systems for cargo planes, adds protections for whistleblowers on safety-related issues, and increases penalties against unruly passengers.

Some critics say that by allowing more flights into some major airports, the bill will increase congestion and compromise safety. but the improved air-traffic handling system should largely address such concerns. And, realistically, it is hard to know how Congress could have put this off much longer in good conscience. By one FAA projection, during the next 11 years the number of large passenger jets needing access to the skies and gate space at airports is expected to grow by half.

It took too long, but justice has been done. In a practical sense, the money in the Aviation Trust Fund has belonged to air passengers all along. At last, they'll see it coming back.

INTRODUCTION OF THE FUEL ENERGY AFFORDABILITY AND CONSERVATION ACT

HON. JOHN ELIAS BALDACCI

OF MAINE

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 21, 2000

Mr. BALDACCI. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce the Fuel Energy Affordability Act. I am pleased to have nearly two dozen of my colleagues joining me as original co-sponsors of this important legislation. The bill takes a two-pronged approach to address issues that have arisen as our constituents cope with dramatically increasing costs of diesel fuel, heating oil and gasoline.

In recent testimony before the House Subcommittee on Energy and Power, the Director of the Petroleum Division at the Energy Information Administration indicated that U.S. crude oil and gasoline inventories are at alarmingly low levels not seen in decades. In addition, we have seen the prices of these products rise over the last year from about $12 per barrel to nearly $34 per barrel in early March.

While there has been some slight moderation in this area, the combination of very high prices and very low inventories has had a severe impact on consumers in the State of Maine and across the nation. You may recall the sharp surge in home heating oil and diesel prices the Northeast experienced in January. Today, gasoline prices still hover near the $2.00 per gallon mark in many areas.

When you live in a state where temperatures in January frequently dip below zero, dramatic increases in heating oil prices are a very serious matter. For people on fixed incomes, it presented a life-threatening choice between paying for delivery of heating oil or buying medicine, between heating the house and buying groceries.

Maine's potato farmers have also seen their livelihoods threatened because trucks could not afford to make the trip to northern Maine to get the crop to market. This high price of diesel caused many truckers to stay off the roads, dramatically affecting delivery of goods throughout the country.

Finally, the high cost of gasoline presents a threat to Maine's tourism industry. Maine's natural beauty and scenic attractions bring in more than $3 Billion of revenues to my state each year. As gas prices creep higher some families are being forced to postpone vacations or stay closer to home. This could have a devastating impact on Maine's economy, and on the more than 12,000 jobs that depend on tourism.

Since the beginning of the year, there have been a number of different options under discussion for dealing with increased fuel prices and low inventories. The Fuel Energy Affordability and Conservation Act which I am offering today seeks to get at the problem from two different angles.

First, my bill will address the problem of major spikes in fuel prices by giving the Secretary of Energy the clear authority to draw down the Strategic Petroleum Reserve when oil and gas prices rise sharply due to anti-competitive activity. This action provide the means by which the Administration can act to lower and stabilize prices, particularly during times of acute need.

Second, my bill will address the issue of consumption by encouraging conservation. It will provide a non-refundable income tax credit of 20% for expenses of up to $10,000 incurred by the taxpayer for qualified energy efficient improvements to a principal place of residence.

This credit will also apply to small businesses with average gross receipts of up to $10 million for the term of the credit. The credit would be available for expenditures made between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2004.

The covered improvements either alone or in combination must improve annual energy performance by at least 30 percent and would include energy efficient building envelope components such as windows, walls, and roofs, and any energy efficient heating, cooling or water heating appliance. Certification of improved energy efficiency could be made by the contractor who made or installed the improvements, a local building regulatory authority, or a qualified energy consultant.

With continued price volatility expected through the summer, and possibly into the fall, we must take steps now to mitigate the impact this could have on the economy, commerce, tourism, and the states we represent. While this legislation does not have all the answers, I believe that it takes a good step forward. I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this legislation.

44TH ANNIVERSARY OF TUNISIAN INDEPENDENCE

HON. BENJAMIN A. GILMAN

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, March 21, 2000

Mr. GILMAN. Mr. Speaker, I rise to take this opportunity to inform my colleagues of the 44th anniversary of Tunisia's independence which occurred on Monday, March 20, 2000. I invite my colleagues to join in extending our congratulations to the leaders and people of this important ally. The Republic of Tunisia has been and continues to be a model of economic growth, while keeping Islamic fundamentalism at bay. Moreover, Tunisia has been at the forefront of normalization with Israel as the Middle East peace process progresses.

Tunisia has taken advantage of foreign aid better than any other nation in the world. The World Bank considers Tunisia to be one of its premier ''success stories.'' With a per capita income of over $2,000 (very high for a developing country without significant mineral resources), Tunisia boasts that over 60 percent of its population can be designated as ''middle class''. The latest bilateral cooperative effort is the U.S.-Magreb Economic Partnership, which